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# These Papers are Intended to Mislead: Soldiers and Freedom Fighters in Mubārak Rabī`'s Comrades in Arms ... and the Moon

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**These Papers are Intended to Mislead: Soldiers and Freedom Fighters in Mubarak Rabi's  
*Comrades in Arms and the Moon*  
IAN CAMPBELL\***

**Abstract**

This article addresses the misleading nature of the rewrite of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war as portrayed in Moroccan Mubarak Rabi's 1976 novel *Rifqat al-Silah ...wa-l-Qamar (Comrades in Arms... and the Moon)*. Papers partially burned by are treating Moroccan officer lure the 'enemy' into attacking a fortified position, thus leading to an Arab victory. The fantastical nature of the war narrative informs a different reading of the novel, focused on Rabi's critique of and skepticism toward the possibility of unity among Arabs that such a victory would require. Rabi's critique centres on the distinction between *jundi*, regular soldier, and *fida* freedom fighter; he explores Arab culture's relation to the two archetypes and redraws the *fida'i* in order to provide a broader and more progressive understanding of the goals and behavior of those who desire radical change.

**Introduction**

Before we ever get to read about a battle in Mubarak Rabi's 1976 war novel, *Rifqat al-Silah ...wa-l-Qamar (Comrades in Arms ... and the Moon)*, we witness a debriefing. Staff officers interview Sergeant 'Ubaha, one of the men in a Moroccan detachment serving with the Syrian Army during the October (1973) Arab-Israeli war, about his commander 'Abd al-Salam's actions during a skirmish:

They began to withdraw one by one, until 'Ubaha and 'Abd al-Salam were left alone, firing away to cover their comrades' retreats. Then 'Abd al-Salam started shooting, and it was possible for 'Ubaha to see him detach from his belt a small wallet, take from it what looked like papers, and began to set them on fire, before issuing his order to 'Ubaha to withdraw in turn. The leader remained alone, covering the retreat.

The [staff] officer stopped him. 'This is precisely the thing we didn't understand in your report: what's this matter of 'burning' that you indicate clearly in your report [but] that doesn't lead to or prove anything?' And what did it lead to? Was it possible for a group of soldiers or an ordinary patrol to carry important or dangerous documents?<sup>1</sup>

Rabi's text repeatedly makes clear that 'Ubaha and his comrades are ordinary soldiers. Yet, as it turns out, by winning the war they are the key to rewriting history: what remains of the documents dupes the enemy into an ill-timed attack, which leads to a breakout, which—it is at no point clarified how—leads to the victory parades that bracket the text. The papers left behind were intended to mislead their readers; and this, in turn, enables the text of *Comrades in Arms* to mislead its readers. The text uses a counterfactual wish-fulfilment Arab victory in the 1973 war to mask a trenchant critique of the preoccupation that Morocco, and by extension the Arab world, of the later 1970s had with wishful thinking about past conflicts. The novel also, by blurring the lines between *jundi*, 'soldier', and *fida* % 'freedom fighter/revolutionary', makes the case for a perspective on combatting injustice different than that of the pan-Arabism the novel depicts—one that is not only more potentially effective, but also rather more culturally plausible than the coordinated multinational force depicted in the novel.

**Reality and Fantasy** Rabi' (b. 1935) is among the best of the second generation of Arabic-language Moroccan novelists who came of age in the years after independence in 1956. While working as an academic, Rabi' began publishing short stories in 1969 and released his first novel *al-Tayyibun (Good People)* in 1972. *Comrades in Arms* is his second novel; it won the Arab Language Academy's first prize in 1975.<sup>2</sup> With his contemporaries Muhammad Zifzaf and Muhammad 'Izz al-Din al-Tazi, Rabi' helped to diversify the Arabic-language Moroccan novel from its initial phase of focusing directly and nearly exclusively on the role of the intellectual in the revolution against colonial authority<sup>3</sup> into a more mature period. The genre in the 1970s still remained committed to what Ahmad al-Madani describes as 'consecrating itself to reality'; that is, 'subject to ideologies which sought to build the nation state, demanding structural changes ... and denouncing the exploitation practiced by the ruling classes'.<sup>4</sup> Novels of this more mature period tended to focus rather more on denouncing the exploitation rather than building the nation-state as did the novels of the previous decade. Yet they also made use of more complex narrative structures and mastery of the craft of writing,<sup>5</sup> and depicted the experiences of a much broader segment of the Moroccan population.

Roger Allen argues that in *Good People* Rabi' addresses tension between country and city: 'Here the land and those who live on it and by it are essentially pawns in the hands of landowners living far away'.<sup>6</sup> This theme is explored more fully in Rabi's 1978 *al-Rih al-Shatawiyya (The Wintry Wind)*, whose first section describes the encounter between free Moroccan peasants and the French who move in and take over their land. *Comrades in Arms* is a departure from these themes: Rabi' wraps a complex and labyrinthine narrative structure around a tale of trench life leading up to first a skirmish and then a battle. The soldiers are members of the Moroccan detachment in the pan-Arab army, engaged with the never-seen Israelis; most of this narrative describes the soldiers' conversations while they rest in relative comfort in their well-appointed trenches and their bunker.

The war narrative is doubly bracketed: the chapters immediately surrounding it describe first how several of the soldiers came to enlist, and then provides us with letters home from those who survive the battle.<sup>7</sup> The novel's first and last chapters provide the perspective of Shaykh Maymun, an elderly veteran of the colonial French army in Indochina, as first he watches the victory parade from atop a minaret in a Moroccan city and then awaits a visit from some of the returning soldiers, who in the trenches had regarded his toughness and perseverance as an archetype.

The text is very specific on the details of the soldiers' life in the trenches, but its approach to larger issues like the war itself is vague. This is enhanced by the blurring between Maymun's perspective as an old and infirm man, his memories of his own military service, the other soldiers' perspectives, and their use of him as a role model. In fact, it is quite possible that the entire narrative is a dream the old man has while dozing in his chair in front of the television news. But this level of ambiguity should be expected from a text whose central section contains papers explicitly intended to mislead.

Rabi' himself claimed to have been inspired by seeing letters home from volunteers who served in the Moroccan detachment during the actual war. He writes that these letters 'made me feel that the psychological distance that separated me from the Arab (Palestinian) issue had lessened, and

had gone so far that I melted into it, then rose to the summit of participation'.<sup>8</sup> He states that he wrote the novel as an 'emotional response' to the war, which explains in part why the Arabs get to win this time around. For Allen, *Comrades in Arms* is a step backward for Rabi: '...the major purpose seems to be to register the presence of Moroccan troops in the conflict'.<sup>9</sup> But I believe the novel deserves another look. The counterfactual structure and frame of the depiction of the Moroccan soldiers and their war mask a complex and nuanced critique both of pan-Arab unity and the role of a self-aware revolutionary in postcolonial Morocco.

### **The One Unburnt Paper**

If we return to the debriefing scene, 'Ubaha and the others return to where they left their commander, never seeing the phantom enemy, although ducking bullets. When they get to where they left Captain<sup>10</sup> 'Abd al-Salam, the enemy is in retreat (107-108). 'Ubaha leans in to hear 'Abd al-Salam whisper 'fire' to himself, and then wonders: 'fire of martyrdom, fire of innocent schoolgirls,<sup>11</sup> birds, begging for help, a fire of vague, unknown papers that the martyred captain destroyed in his last moments?' (108).

Once 'Abd al-Salam touches the flame to the edge of one of these papers, he 'extinguished it quickly and threw it aside, then continued to burn the other papers completely' (108). He does this again; 'Ubaha notes that it is quite deliberate; this confuses the officers as much as it does 'Ubaha. The following chapter has the soldiers waiting for the next battle to start; the enemy is enticed to attack their fortified position, leading to their repulsion, breakout and victory (111-126).<sup>12</sup> The issue of 'Abd al-Salam's papers is not brought up again for another two chapters, when in the penultimate chapter as the victorious Moroccan soldiers are preparing to depart, 'Ubaha reflects on the debriefing.

The high-ranking officer [asked ... ] 'what was the reason for the retreat? You were in a good position relative to the enemy patrols. Was the movement behind you real or a phantom? Your view was good; despite that, it could have been a phantom.' (143)

'Ubaha's response is to address not the officer, as the debriefing is long over, but rather Shaykh Maymun, the subject of the first and last chapters of *Comrades in Arms* and whom the other soldiers have been apostrophizing throughout the midsection of the text:

Your son 'Ubaha is today a new being like every being here after ['Abd al-Salam,] the 'man of the great month,'<sup>13</sup> the month of fire ... fire ... the fire of the symphonic rhythm murmured by the lips of the perishing martyr Captain 'Abd al-Salam, the fire of burnt innocence sought in the school of the teacher 'Abd al-Salam, or the fire of the papers burnt purposely (*bi-l-tadbir*) by the captain? (143)

Not only is 'Abd al-Salam's burning of the papers both deliberate and the most meaningful event in the text of *Comrades in Arms*, but it is also something that both 'Abd al-Salam and 'Ubaha have concealed from the high command, although inadvertently in 'Ubaha's case as he does not remember it until the debriefing is long over. Once he does remember, he goes on to explain—to nobody—that the captain made the enemy believe they had paid full price for these half-burnt details, and that therefore when the breakout attack came it would be a feint. All of this is a

pretty impressive bit of tactical deception: the phantom of the attack is itself a phantom. But what is even more remarkable is that an ordinary soldier has taken it upon himself to win the war—and it works. But remember: the most important papers in *Comrades in Arms ... and the Moon* are intended to mislead.

### **Fantasy and Victory**

So when the Moroccan critic Hamid Lahmidani writes that the portrayal of the Arab- Israeli conflict in *Comrades in Arms* is less successful than its portrayal in Khannatha Bennuna's 1969 novel *al-Nar wa-l-Ikhtiyar* (*Fire and Choice*), the other Arabic-language Moroccan novel of the epoch that takes the Arab-Israeli conflict as its subject,<sup>14</sup> it is hard to argue that he is wrong. There is merit in his basic thesis that Rabf's novel, by displacing the conflict geographically, makes it less immediate to Moroccan readers.<sup>15</sup>

It is equally hard to argue that the wish-fulfilment fantasy in the novel does not displace the conflict even further. In the actual war, two Moroccan brigades were sent, one to the Sinai and the other to Syria,<sup>16</sup> but Saad el Shazly, the strategist behind the initial Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal, stated that like nearly all Arab expeditionary forces they 'came with no logistical plan or support, expecting their hosts to supply them, and in several cases causing logistical problems'.<sup>17</sup> The Moroccan troops had a very peripheral role in the initial stage of the Syrian invasion of the Golan, but they failed in their mission<sup>18</sup> and, in the words of an Israeli colonel in the thick of the fight, 'Their attack was pretty unprofessional. The soldiers ran in a straight line up a path and were easily shot ...'.<sup>19</sup> After the first four days of the war, when the Syrian Army and its auxiliaries were pushed in rout from the Golan, the brave but poorly-led Moroccan brigade reinforced the Syrian 7th Division on the far right of the Syrian line. But the Israelis were occupied with over-running the Syrian troops on their own right and so arrayed only very light forces against the Moroccans.<sup>20</sup> For the next 10 days or so, the Moroccan troops remained in static positions.

If we were to regard the trench life in the novel as a meaningful representation of the actual Moroccan troops, we would see a group of soldiers who had been battered, routed and then bypassed. But there is no mention of serious defeat in the novel, the soldiers appear to have occupied their trenches for much longer, the Moroccans are relevant to the conflict, and the Arabs win the war. All of this takes quite a bit away from any claim that *Comrades in Arms* consecrates itself to reality. We may therefore consider whether the novel is not about the Arab/Israeli conflict at all, except in so far as a fantasy of the war is the novel's setting; rather, I submit that the issues the soldiers raise in their discussions are the novel's real subject.

The text's utter lack of specificity in reference to the Israelis, who are never *'Israiliyyin* but only *al-'adw*, 'the enemy', reinforces the hypothesis that Rabf's novel is not actually about the Six-Day War.<sup>21</sup> The 'Israelis' may be united in their anonymity, but unity is precisely what does not characterize the Arabs in the text. The central section of *Comrades in Arms*, where the soldiers exist only in trench life, enables the delivery of a powerfully critical message—that Arab culture discourages unity and any kind of real leadership is entirely absent from official discourse—in an organic and persuasive manner, all while being ostensibly 'about' the improbable and counterfactual Arab victory in the war.

## Conflict and Reconciliation

A visit to the trenches by higher-ranking officers causes one soldier to reflect upon the Arabs as a whole:

It is written for you, Abu Muhammad, that your candle would be extinguished in this downfall (*suqut*), and this despite all your surroundings, the results of a plan you did not anticipate when you set out on the path of a regular soldier instead of the path of incursion (*iqtiham*) or sacrifice (*Jiday* Who created the tragedy of the Arabs? The Arabs themselves. Do they realize that? They are, at any rate, creating it under the cover of poetry, sighs of ecstasy (*tarab*) and seasons of debate! The best introduction to this downfall (*suqut*) was what some of them said: the Arabs spend half their year in conflict and the other half in reconciliation! (75)

These might at first appear to be idle thoughts, but it is here, wrapped in false papers and the fantasy of an old man, that we encounter the philosophical argument at the heart of a tale about military life. Its first feature is the distinction between a regular professional soldier (*jundi nizami*), on one hand, and the combination of *iqtiham* and *fida'* on the other. The first word of this pair implies infiltration, incursion and invasion, and the second redeeming or ransoming something: their nexus is fundamentally small-scale actions in which the individual fighters have authority to make decisions. In contrast, joining a (trans)national military with staff officers and debriefings—the implication of *jundi nizami*—means ceding this decision-making authority to a command structure that does not consult the soldiers.

Rabf's character poses the argument that Arabs, with their fractious nature, simply are not very good at being professional soldiers, unable as they are in this view to remain united. Yet we must consider that this argument is proposed in a novel whose setting is that of a united (and ultimately victorious) Arab army, and which immediately undermines that very idea by not only wrapping that army in layers of forged paper and dreams, but also having this army's victory be the result of individual initiative rather than grand strategy.

## Soldiers and Freedom Fighters

Rabf himself undertakes some of the unpacking by centring the next two pages on the argument among the soldiers<sup>22</sup> on the difference between a *jundi* and a *fida'i*. The second word occupies the place where a westerner might use 'freedom fighter' (or 'terrorist'). A *fida'i* is an irregular soldier, someone who does possess decision-making authority but does not have meaningful logistical or strategic support. The *jundi*, by contrast, has the latter but not the former. Rabi" has another soldier say '*fida'i* and *jundi* are the same thing', to which Abu Muhammad thinks, but does not say:

How and with what logic can one equate someone who carries his spirit at the mouth of a gun or the blade of a knife, someone who searches through vast perils each moment of his existence, with someone who takes a break while waiting for a hot meal? How can one equate someone who knows his fate, who has planned for this fate, who carries it wholeheartedly, every moment, creating his existence, with someone who wastes his time in a series of consultations, arguments and reconciliations? (76)

Two things are evident from this citation: according to its logic, the *fida'i* lives a much truer and more self-aware existence than the *jundi*-, and the Arabs, who have already been established as those who consult, argue and reconcile, are thus better suited to life as *junud* rather than *fida'i*in. This appears fundamentally paradoxical: the previous citations have appeared to support the disunity of the Arabs as precluding them from acting with the sort of unity necessary to become proper *junud*. But in fact the argument is consistent, once we understand that Arabs are depicted here as doing well as regular *junud* in small units, arguing and sharing bits of poetry in their trenches, but unable to unite to the degree sufficient to undertake an effective overarching strategy. Yet an individual Arab such as 'Abd al-Salam or perhaps a small group, separated from the polity, can attain the singularity of purpose necessary to act as a *fida'i*. For, ultimately, only the actions of a *fida'i* lead to the victory parades in this novel. The nature of the equational logic given to us in this section of *Comrades in Arms* places (most of) the Arabs squarely in the category of those who are not aware of or in control of their fates: like the Moroccan troops in the actual war, they are misled.

The section continues with another soldier saying 'They are both in the battle and the battle is one', to which Abu Muhammad replies, this time audibly instead of only in his thoughts:

Yes, the battle is one, that is correct; but the styles and the situations differ. The *jundi* walks in the shadow of politics and the *fida'i* in the shadow of revolution (*al-thawra*). Politics is conflict, reconciliation and maneuvering; revolution is the unity of the path, and woe betide anyone who misses the path [... ] (76-77)

Abu 'All broke in, calmly and confidently, saying: 'the revolution the *fida'i* created is the one the *jundi* created, and submission to both of them, to the same degree, is of importance'. But Abu Muhammad's outburst interrupts:

*Hab'ibi*, the path of revolution is clear: it is not just talk, nor maneuvering; it is a life that operates and renews itself, and it must continue like that and not stop until it realizes all its goals. But we, in all this maneuvering, end up freezing (*tajmld*) our periphery ('*atrafana*) little by little, just like we are doing here now, and like our counterparts are doing in other locations. We are portraying a frozen periphery. (76-77)

The philosophy here reinforces the action recalled later in the book: in larger polities like 'the Arab nation', the Arabs are immobilized in a cycle of fighting what is effectively the last war, or the one before that,<sup>23</sup> able as they are only in fantasy to unite. Only the actions of *fida'i* will be effective, because individually or in smaller units this kind of unity of purpose is feasible—and effective: 'Abd al-Salam won the war for the Arabs because his unity of purpose led him to take action to mislead the enemy with by burning the papers.

### **Revolution and Renewal**

On the one hand, *fida'i* is the only path to victory: without that kind of spirit, the soldiers will wind up with a frozen periphery, where "arm/can denote both the individual's limbs and the 'wings' of the army, and the trench warfare in which the text has previously described the soldiers as 'immobilized', '*mujammad*'. On the other, the Arabs as a transnational force are effectively foreclosed from *fida'i*, as the text's choice of terms makes clear: their fractiousness makes it impossible to have the unity of purpose necessary for real revolutionary action.<sup>24</sup> They are stuck in old arguments—which may very well explain the novel's setting in this fantasy version of the second Arab-Israeli war.

RabI' gives us a way out of this paradox: the notion of the *fida* 7 as one whose life renews itself (*tatajaddad*). Only by escaping the cycle of conflict and reconciliation— by refusing to fight the last battle with the tactics of the battle before—will a given *fida'i*, and by extension any Arab who wants real change, be able to realize their goals. Reviving the Palestinian conflict, or any other issue that history has passed by, is not what will lead to a victory parade in real life. Note that the *fida'i*'s life renews itself, from the reflexive/passive Form V verb, whereas the wings or periphery are immobilized or frozen not by themselves but by outside forces, presumably the cycle of conflict and resolution. Rabf's use of the Form II participle *mujammada* makes this all the more noticeable in that it would have made more sense from the point of view of parallel construction to call the periphery *mutajammada*, adding the infixed *-ta-* and thereby removing the outside agent.

The advantages of this kind of renewal are at least twofold. One is decentralization: the text of *Comrades in Arms* has already provided us with multiple examples of the implausibility of an effective Arab organized resistance movement, whereas the spirit of renewal RabI' describes almost inevitably precludes the formation of larger-scale organizations. The hidden advantage of this is that decentralization enables revolutionaries to not present a target to the security forces of the various Arab regimes, who, as the overall tenor of Moroccan Arabic-language novels during the 1970s demonstrates in abundance, attempt to prevent any irruption of revolutionary consciousness.

The second, and rather subtler, advantage is that RabI' has greatly expanded the scope of what might constitute successful revolutionary action. Yes, the entire novel centres around military life, and yes, the revolutionary is described immediately before as living at the tip of a weapon. But the heart of the novel is that these papers are false. Only when a would-be *fidai* steps outside the stagnation of traditional confrontations will she become a true revolutionary. One does not, therefore, need an actual weapon to live as if at the point of one. While living as if at the tip of a weapon may or may not lead to real, meaningful change, it will certainly end with a lower casualty rate than the sort of repetition compulsion that leads to trench warfare and fantasy victory parades.

## Notes

1. RabI', *Rifqat al-Silah*, 105-106. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.
2. Starkey and Meisami, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, 643.
3. Campbell, *Labyrinths, Intellectuals and the Revolution*, 107-134.
4. Al-Madini, 'The Maghrib', 198.
5. Ibid., 195.
6. Allen, 'Mature Arabic Novel', 209.
7. Many of the letters home RabI' includes are written by Abd al-Salam to his father Maymun before the former's death; most of the rest are written by the other characters to 'Abd al-Salam's wife, expressing their deep regard for him and his noble death in battle.
8. Lahmidani, *al-Riwaya al-Maghribiya wa-Ru'yat al-Waqi al-Ijtuna 'iy*, 230-231.
9. Allen, *Arabic Novel*, 65.



10. The text often shifts him back and forth in rank between *mulazim*, 'lieutenant', and '*aqid*, 'captain'.
11. A reference to an event that led one of the soldiers to join the army.
12. This battle is not the skirmish about which 'Ubaha was debriefed, but rather the second and much larger battle.
13. The action takes place during Ramadan, as did the actual 1973 war.
14. Benuna's protagonist Leila is driven to spend her entire life by what only midway through the narrative becomes clear is the shock of the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six- Day War. Every other character in the novel simply goes about their business, apparently unaffected by the war and the plight of the Palestinians, which makes Leila seem hysterical or depressed to them and makes them seem like aliens to her. All of *Fire and Choice* takes place in Morocco. See Campbell, *Labyrinths, Intellectuals and the Revolution*, 142-159.
15. Lahmidani, *al-Riwaya al-Maghribiya wa-Ru'yat al-Waqi al-Ijtima'i*, 234.
16. Asher and Hammel, *Duel for the Golan*, 143. English-language sources on the war tend to over-represent the Israeli perspective.
17. El Shazly, *Crossing of Suez*, 278.
18. Caddick-Adams, 'Golan Heights, battles of', 365.
19. Rabinovich, *Yom Kippur War*, 193.
20. Dunstan, *Yom Kippur War 1973 (1)*, 178-180.
21. Moreover, the war's strategic goals and its termination are equally absent from the text. The end of the novel strongly implies that the phantom feint that led to the soldiers overrunning the enemy was the key to victory, but what was the nature of this victory? Were the Israelis driven into the sea? Were they forced to retreat to the 1967 borders, or to the 1948 borders, or to accept the right of return of Palestinian refugees? We simply are not told, leaving us to wonder whether we are therefore being encouraged to read the novel at the surface level of its plot.
22. Themselves all *juriud*.
23. Nobody in 1976, or 1973 or even 1967, who wanted to actually win a war would have engaged in trench warfare; this reinforces the fantastical nature of the victory of the united Arab army. Even a cursory examination of the actual Arab/Israeli wars demonstrates that mobility and speed were the keys to victory. The trench situation is only possible because the Moroccans were entirely peripheral to the war.
24. Rabl's text does not address the political disunity that characterized and still characterizes the Arab world and that led to the Moroccan brigades being treated as separate entities on both the Syrian and Egyptian fronts in the actual 1973 war. There is no mention of the national governments in this novel: not their collective egos nor the egos of their leaders, which are and have been one of the primary obstacles to unity.

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